

Bipartisan Agreement on Farm Bill Moves Forward

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House and Senate agriculture leaders Jan. 27 announced a bipartisan, bicameral agreement on a five-year farm bill that

they say will reduce the deficit, grow the economy and provide certainty to the 16 million Americans whose jobs depend on agriculture, the House Committee on Agriculture announced in a news release the evening the agreement was reached.

The Agricultural Act of 2014 was

subsequently approved by the House of Representatives by a 251-166 vote Jan. 29, the morning after President Barack Obama's State of the Union address in which he promised to bypass Congress if necessary and take executive action to accomplish his goals. The 2014 Farm

Bill now moves to the Senate, which is expected to vote on the measure the first week of February. If approved by the Senate, it will move to the president's desk for signage.

Many agricultural groups have come out in favor of the conference report, supporting passage of the bill, while the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) have expressed strong opposition.

Committee leaders promote bill

In announcing agreement to the conference report, the House Agriculture Committee noted that it contains major reforms, including eliminating the direct-payment program, streamlining and consolidating numerous programs to improve their effectiveness and reduce duplication, and cutting down on program misuse. The bill also strengthens the nation's commitment to support farmers and ranchers affected by natural disasters or significant economic losses, and renews a national commitment to protect land, water and other natural resources.

"I am proud of our efforts to finish a farm bill conference report with significant savings and reforms," said Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla.), chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. "We are putting in place sound policy that is good for farmers, ranchers, consumers and those who have hit difficult times."

"Today's bipartisan agreement puts us on the verge of enacting a five-year farm bill that saves taxpayers billions, eliminates unnecessary subsidies, creates a more effective farm safety net and helps farmers and businesses create jobs," said Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. "This bill proves that by working across party lines, we can reform programs to save taxpayer money while strengthening efforts to grow our economy."

"I am pleased that we were able to work together, putting aside partisanship to finally advance a five-year farm bill," said Rep. Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee. "Compromise is rare in Washington these days, but it's what is needed to actually get things done. While it's no secret that I do not support some of the final bill's provisions, I believe my reservations are outweighed by the need to provide long-term certainty for agriculture and nutrition programs."

"This bill reflects a lot of hard work and conscientious effort to help strengthen American agriculture and assure consumers of food and fiber that it is nutritious and affordable," said Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee. "The reforms, savings and other significant changes in this agreement will provide greater certainty

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to producers and rural communities, as well as American consumers.”

Core tenets

Enacting the Agricultural Act of 2014 will reform agriculture programs, reduce the deficit, and help farmers, ranchers and business owners grow the economy,

according to the House Agriculture Committee release. The legislation:

- Repeals the direct-payment program and strengthens risk-management tools.
- Repeals outdated programs and consolidates duplicative ones,

eliminating nearly 100 programs or authorizations.

- Helps farmers and ranchers create jobs and provides certainty for the 16 million Americans working in agriculture.
- Strengthens conservation efforts to protect land, water and wildlife for future generations.
- Maintains food assistance for families

while addressing fraud and misuse in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

- Reduces the deficit by billions of dollars in mandatory spending.

The bill strengthens crop insurance. With crop insurance, farmers invest in their own risk management by purchasing insurance policies so they are protected in difficult times. Crop insurance also helps protect Americans from spikes in food prices. Without crop insurance farmers would have no way to recover from disaster unless the government stepped in and provided unplanned disaster assistance.

The effectiveness of crop insurance was underscored during the historic droughts of 2012, which affected more than 80% of the country. Crop insurance protected farmers without the need for an emergency disaster-relief bill.

The bill provides a permanent livestock disaster-assistance program for producers affected by natural disasters and covers producers who were affected by recent droughts, winter storms that hit the Northern Plains last year, and spring freezes that affected fruit growers in the Midwest.

The Agricultural Act of 2014 consolidates 23 existing conservation programs into 13 programs while strengthening tools to protect and conserve land, water and wildlife. By streamlining programs, the Farm Bill provides added flexibility and ensures conservation programs are working for producers in the most effective and efficient way — an approach supported by nearly 650 conservation organizations from all 50 states.

The bipartisan farm bill conference agreement maintains assistance for families while stopping fraud and misuse to achieve savings in the SNAP. It closes a loophole being used by some states to artificially inflate benefits for a small number of recipients. Additionally, the agreement stops lottery winners from continuing to receive assistance; increases program efficiency; cracks down on trafficking, fraud and misuse; and invests in new pilot programs to help people secure employment through job training and other services.

Growing the ag economy

According to the House Agriculture Committee release, the Agricultural Act of 2014 reduces the deficit while strengthening top priorities that help to grow the agricultural economy. The bill:

- Boosts export opportunities to help farmers find new global markets for their goods.
- Continues investments to meet growing consumer demand for fresh fruits and vegetables, local foods and organics by helping family farmers sell locally, increasing support for farmers' markets, and connecting farmers to schools and other community-based organizations.

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- Supports beginning farmers and ranchers with training and access to capital.
- Increases assistance for food banks.
- Reduces regulatory barriers.
- Invests in state-run pilot projects to encourage and incentivize employment and training opportunities for families in need.
- Creates initiatives to help veterans start agriculture businesses.
- Grows American bio-based manufacturing (manufacturing processes using raw agricultural products grown in America).
- Expands bio-energy production,

supporting non-food-based advanced biomass energy production such as cellulosic ethanol and woody biomass power.

- Invests in research to promote productivity and new agricultural innovations.
- Strengthens rural-development initiatives to help rural communities upgrade infrastructure and create

a better environment for small businesses.

Industry weighs in

Industry groups have expressed mixed opinions of the proposed agreement. The NCBA, the NPPC and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) hosted a media briefing Jan. 28 in which they vowed to oppose passage of the farm bill because it did not contain “fixes” to mandatory country-of-origin labeling (mCOOL). NCBA President and Cody, Wyo., cattleman Scott George said passage of the Farm Bill without a fix for mCOOL would spur trade retaliation by Canada and Mexico that will endanger the U.S. livestock industry.

In an official statement, George said the bill did not address the priority issues its members had for a farm bill. Calling mCOOL a mistake, he said it “has already resulted in steep discounts to our producers and caused prejudice against our largest trading partners. This program was created without the consent of producers and has been a failure by every measure.”

Continued George, “Failure to fix mCOOL at this juncture will lead to retaliatory tariffs on a host of commodities and it is only a matter of time before the World Trade Organization rules in favor of Canada and Mexico. Once that happens, producers will realize the full costs of this failed legislation.”

For a complete list of commodities on the Canadian retaliatory list, go to <http://bit.ly/1eaLRcz>. For the commodities on the Mexican retaliatory list, visit <http://bit.ly/1idXBdE>.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) and Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund United Stockgrowers of America (R-CALF-USA), both in favor of mCOOL as it stands in the bill, applauded passage of the agreement, as did the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF), the National Farmers Union (NFU), the Land Trust Alliance and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC).

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) noted that the farm bill reported by the conference committee renews funding for a number of important programs that were left stranded by last year’s farm bill extension, but fails to make much-needed reforms in the structure of farm policy. Ariane Lotti, assistant policy director with NSAC, said the organization would support passage of the Farm Bill with the caveat that it would continue to seek real reform.



Editor’s Note: *This article was compiled from news releases by the organizations mentioned. With the Senate expected to vote on the 2014 Farm Bill the first week of February as we are attending the 2014 Cattle Industry Convention in Nashville, Tenn., we are sure to learn more about this impending legislation. Visit the Newsroom at www.4cattlemen.com for convention coverage and to learn more about the 2014 Farm Bill.*